

Taben Jom : A Study From Socio Cultural Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: *The custom of Taben Jom is hugely popular among Santals. In this custom the married daughters of Santal families get a gift of considerable amount of farming land from their brother or father as a show of affection to them . The practice is also economically important as it presents the daughter as an inheritor to her father's property and provides a sense of economic security to her in case her husband dies or her marriage fails. But the custom which is meant to empower and honour Santal women has a story discussing the reason of Taben Jom which presents Santal women with totally dishonouring character. The paper is meant to bring into light the reason behind the ignominious presentation of women in a story which aims to honour her. The topic will be discussed from feminist, social and cultural perspectives . The paper will also try to assess the position of women in Santal Society.*

KEYWORD: Taben Jom- a gift to married daughter by either her brother or her father consisting mainly of landed property. *Jiwet Lagit-* for life time . *Ghar Jawai-* a son in law who resides in his in law's house and dependent economically upon them. Ideology- a Marxist term meaning a set of ideas exploited to get certain benefits. Phallogocentric-Adhering to the male ideology

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Taben is a Santali word meaning flattened rice which is a favourite food for Santals. The phrase commonly refers to the act of taking food. In Santali Society the phrase refers to the custom of presenting a married daughter of the family with a certain amount of land. The gift is presented either by her brother or her father . The gift comprising a certain amount of land is generally given as a show of family affection or love to the married daughters to secure her financial position or to make arrangement for her new settlement near her father's house. In certain cases *taben jom* is given conferring absolute right over the land . In that case ownership over the land does cease with the death of the person who received the gift . Her descendants will enjoy the land. In other cases the land is given for *jiwet lagit* (for the life span of the married daughter. With her death the land will come back to her father or brother . Her husband or descendants will get nothing.) It usually consists of not more than ten bighas and is often little more than two or three bighas. The gift is given either on the occasion of the girl's wedding and sometimes after she is married. Though Taben jom is primarily given out of affection to married daughters , it shows the importance of married daughters in family . The urge on the part of father or brother to secure her future in case she is ill-treated by her husband and in laws. Sometimes a brother arranges for his sister's Taben jom with the fear that she might be neglected or ill treated by his future wife. W G Archer in his seminal book *Tribal Law and Justice* makes a detailed description of Taben Jom. While describing the rights of married daughters he cites examples Taben Jom happening at various places of Santal Pargana. "In Sundarpahari Budhrui Murmu had four sons and two daughters . One daughter was married in Jabarda. As her children kept dying in that village and she and her husband came back to Sundarpahari. When they arrived , he gave them some land as Taben Jom." In other circumstances Taben Jom is granted to convert a son-in law into a ghar jawai .Such gifts are ceremonially approved in the village meeting and with the full consent of her brother. Taben Jom , viewed from the cited references can be deemed as an important custom to honour and empower women in Santal Society.

In the custom of Taben Jom , there is an underlying sense of obligation to a daughter or sister the root cause of which is emphasized in the myth which vitalizes and sanctions the custom. According to the myth , once a person was married to a woman who was a witch . She made her husband a curry from the after birth of a goat. The husband ate it . Then she said " you have eaten living meat. Tell me what it is or I will kill you ". The husband could not guess so he sent for his sister. As the sister came , she heard the young ones of a vulture talking to their mother "Mother, we are starving". The vulture replied," Never mind . Tomorrow I will give you flesh . A woman is killing her husband . She gave him the after birth of a goat and he ate it without knowing . The sister reached the house and said to the wife ,"How will you kill my brother?". The wife showed the

weapon . Then the sister took it and killed her saying , "You made my brother eat the after birth and you will kill him . " Then because she saved his life , her brother gave her land as *taben jom*. Since then brothers are giving *taben jom* to their sisters.

Taben jom is a custom of showing gratitude to sisters by their brothers if the above mentioned myth is accepted as true. But the valid question is whether this myth presents women as savior of men . The main antagonist in the tale is none other than the man's wife. She has hatched the plan to kill her own husband and we find her in a distasteful character. The relationship between husband and wife is one of the holiest relationships in this world. The wife is found to be breaching the bond . It directly establishes the fact that women are not to be trusted ; they have a tendency of betraying their dear ones , they do not value relationships , and they are apt to pretend innocence when they are actually not. The other character presented in the narrative is the epitome of goodness and benevolence. She rushes towards her brother's house immediately after receiving message about her brother's impending misfortune. On the way as she overhears the conversation between the vultures , she resolves to take actions swiftly to save her brother's life. She acts bravely in killing the newly wed bride . She is just the contrary opposite to the brother's wife. From her behaviour and activities it can easily be concluded that the reward of *taben jom* is given justly to her. So women are presented here with two contrary opposite roles ; one representing the model of ideal sister with all her good qualities and the other with all the vileness of a corrupt lady. So , the representation clearly shows that women as a race are not unmixed innocence . Rather only few are good as the sister of the narrative . The rightful conclusion of the argument is that women can not be trusted blindly. Only sisters can be trusted in relation crucial and secret matters.

Now the sister becomes a bride when she marries a person chosen by her family. In that occasion she is playing the role of a wife and the members of her in law's house can easily view her as a potential threat to their male member's life . As the environment changes and she is transported from her father's house to her in law's house she loses all her innocence and good will and is doomed to represent the character of a cold blooded villain as dictated by the myth . The same woman who was viewed as a savior in her father's house is now framed into a totally opposite character. Now another woman is supposed to play the role of a savior who is obviously the female member of that house by birth. The general attitude of the Santals presents woman born to their family as innocent and good and view woman brought into family through marriage as villainous and prone to destruction of the family. The contrasting character traits of good and bad given to almost the same person playing different roles in different situations draws into play the politics of gender representation in literary and oral narratives to frame the role of feminine gender in society and also the patriarchal ideology of controlling and suppressing the image and role of women in society.

One of the most discussed issue in feminist studies is the subjugation of women through negative representation of them in all the spheres of society. It is the well organised tactics of male society dating back to the beginning of civilization to create such representation in such a way as to make it look like just and natural. Kate millett in her book *Sexual Politics* states, "It is interesting that many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against ; no better proof can be found of the totality of their conditioning." The feminine gender and the essential femininity of a woman has nothing to do with the female body . Both male and female are endowed with equal mental and physical power. But women are placed in an inferior position through double means - first by repeated stressing that women are weak in physical power and lack logical capability. They are mostly presented as emotional beings acting foolishly and intuitively. The second way of devaluing women is to portray them as volatile creatures having sinister or lethal impact upon society. Women are viewed to be the source of every kind of mischief. This negative conception clearly places women in a lower position . The same phallogocentric ideology operates in Santal society . *Taben Jom* is the mythical story created by the phallogocentric Santal society to portray Santal woman in such a negative way. The sister presented as a good character stands as a sharp contrast to the newly married person's wife. The goodness of the sister is balanced by the vileness of the newly married bride. The same woman can be presented with dual roles ; one in her father's family as a saviour and the other in her in -law's family as a cold blooded murderer. The politics of biased representation of woman is fully operative here. This kind of representation may be viewed as a tool of suppressing the female voice of the newly married woman by presenting a dark and sinister image of a newly married bride before her. Through that representation it would be easier for the in laws of the bride to ignore her importance and devalue her as brides are prone to acting bloody activities against the family members and they should not be trusted in case of serious family issues. The daughter is given due prominence in all family matters while brides are excluded out of it. This practice refers to the game of power going on in Santal society. Santal Society , being a male centric society is not inclined to give any decision making power to the womenfolk. In all serious familial and Societal matters , only the male members assemble to come to a decision making conclusion. Now to keep women out of that sphere of power , it is wise to present women in the worst possible light . *Taben Jom* gives Santal Society that desired proof of women's inconstancy to develop the reason of not including women in the decision making circle. On the other hand sisters are shown in favorable light . But if they are unmarried , they dare not demand the space to enter that decision making circle as they have been raised right from their

childhood in that strong patriarchal environment . And they obviously show more power in matters related to domestic affairs as they are more reliable to the family's male members. So in the domestic matters of the family , mother in law and sister in law remain the most powerful ones and the newly inducted family member remains virtually dumb only obeying their words without protest . So in matters of domestic power politics the newly wed bride is completely ousted by her in laws. In the case of sister of the family , in most cases she is married soon or later , so she would not be physically present at the family to interfere into the domestic matters. The mother in law becomes the executive of the domestic area of the family . But if the sister becomes a widow or her marriage fails and she has to come back and settle in her father's family or near her father's family she enjoys a certain amount of preference in domestic matters till the wife gets her child , overcomes the initial unfavorable atmosphere and begins to have a saying in domestic matters. So the mythical story of Taben Jom having strong phallogocentric sentiment actually helps women to grab domestic power by ousting another woman . It is a unique example of subjugation of women by another woman using phallogocentric ideology.

In Taben Jom there is a clear reference to a heinous superstitious belief still rampant in Santal society. The newly wed bride's intention to kill her husband and eat his flesh has clear resemblance to the witches' desire to kill a human being by casting her influence or taking help from her bonga husband and then cook the sweet portions of the flesh secretly for consumption. Santals believe that a woman after getting due training in the practice of witchcraft has to cast spell upon one of her near male relatives and kill him for the purpose eating his flesh in order to complete the process and settle as a successful witch. Two things are important in this act - one is the need to cast influence upon near male relative and destroy his life , and the other is to cook his flesh and eat it . So the final act in the making of a witch has a perfect resemblance to the newly wed bride's decision to trap her husband in riddle like questions and then kill him in order to eat his flesh . Marriage is a holy act bringing together two souls. For Santals it is of considerable importance as it marks the beginning of their new domestic life with raised importance in Society and the permission to begin a new family. Marriage is considered as a holy act of union between two souls by almost all the societies of this world . Santal society is no exception. So it is rather surprising to find the newly wed bride with the desire to kill her own husband . The mythical story of Taben Jom actually makes us believe this thing. And the story establishes the fact that the bride is actually a witch. This story helps the the society to establish the fact that the wives may be witches . The story provides necessary evidence to the witch believers to call the Santal Women as witch . Once she is proved to be a witch , it would become justifiable to harass them physically and mentally and in some cases kill them to bring peace and prosperity to the family just as the newly wed wife was killed by her sister-in-law. Though the custom of Taben Jom provides Santal women sense of economic security in the form of landed property, it actually degrades her image in society and acts as a tool to present women in unfavorable light .

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